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Two Poems: Your American Songbook & Context Clues

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Creative and Literary Works

Two Poems

Sokunthary Svay

Your American Songbook

Ameling, Caballé, Norman, Bonney, Fleming, Battle

Arpeggios, immunizations

Successful completion for the fall, English Major code

Passport expired 04 Nov 2012

Eyebrows thin as commas hair articulates the plump

Drug-free face. A runny signature.

Naturalization certificate a partially sleepy-eyed citizen one less

boyfriend two sizes down.

I don't want to know the stars in Ashbery's "America" they feel of
asterisks beside the names of my family on the refugee pages indications of sickness, by-the-
ways

Who is "your janitor"? *My* janitor is a father who gave me his name, books with titles
left for garbage pick up by NYU.



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Honors and Awards skills education transcriber, flute, cum laude MS office

I run into Kimiko at the bar after she teaches. She rips pages out of a discarded book and
we do a writing exercise over martinis. Highlight words from a self-help book. I found
her found words.

Aggressively dissatisfied but

A surprising body, which is

A plant in some way

Groups children

From homes happy and happy

Excepting for the unhappy

Blood.

John keeps mentioning this janitor and this country. I sang an Aaron Copland song for an
audition:

“Long Time Ago” Ballad of lost love where “droop’d the willow” and “back

the billow

Ashbery’s “Terrain / Glistening” as “her blue eyes glisten’d”

American songs are in the eyes

in what we see. Or in the luring across the waters to Europe

in the languages and songs, *o quand je dors* *morgen*

Mozartian sixteenths staccato of the immigrant at the conveyor belt

my brother assembles pistons. Pistons.

That hymn we sang in the church for the god I don't believe in exalts

"How can I keep from singing?"

Context Clues

Nyam
Nyum
Nyim
Nom
Nawm
Nov
Ngai
Nung

No
Not
Nut
Near
Nub
Nun
Now
Naught
Nope
Next
Nip
Knot

These are the sounds and yet the words differ. I want to say "ut ey dtay" but that won't put you at ease, no more than "don't worry" does in English. The sounds float in my memory and release in situations where the sounds become relevant. Unearthed for those who pronounce the labiodental, lip-to-tongue sounds with a cluck, a glottal, a breath, aspirate, an aspiration. Here. How. Hold. Home. Help. Who? Humble. Heart. Whole.

Wear
Knear
Thear
Twear
Trey
Ey
Bey
Srey
Parey
Tmey
Sdey

Soursdey

What is translation? What do their English equivalents matter? They aspire for accuracy, but are not answers. Diphthongs and umlauts, vowels extending into different shapes of the mouth, closed or opened in the back, swallowed and regurgitated.

Bei
Bong
Baht
Borey
Bai
Badt
Baich

Butt
Bar
Boss
Bold
Bit
Bye
Buy
Bend

Twist the diction until it sounds authentic, local, regional, mistaken-for someone else. Speak to belong, speak to other, to own—whether one’s or another’s. Crippling crunch of consonants. Crew of long vowels crashing into the sea. This is history.

For a language with vocal stops, child and mother end with open vowels as if moaning, calling: oan, mae

My Mae is my cry. Before I have the words in the womb, in the crib, the cry elongates because duration is the key to being heard. I endure.

Even “Mak” with its vocal stops, I defy it, shout Maaaa-(k). Hold the “a” into an “ah.” Does this relieve, does it sing? My voices teacher wants me to sing pure vowels in Italian opera. What is purity? What makes a language impure?

A woman answers yes with a “dja” (unaspirated) the “a” lengthened while men are cut off in “baht” the tongue stopping itself behind the upper teeth. The teeth a cage of mouth that seeks opening. What gender opens and what pricks.

I seek trust in the seed of this language // BUN DTAY (but) // it grows with uncertainty.

About the Author



Sokunthary Svay is a Khmer writer from New York City. A founding member of the Cambodian American Literary Arts Association (CALAA). She has received fellowships from the American Opera Project, Poets House, Willow Books, and CUNY, as well as commissions from Washington National Opera, the Asian American Writers' Workshop, and ISSUE Project Room. In addition to publishing a poetry collection, *Apsara in New York* (Willow Books, 2017), Svay has had her writing anthologized and performed by actors and singers. Svay's first opera, *Woman of Letters*, set by composer Liliya Ugay, received its world premiere at the Kennedy Center in January 2020 as part of the American Opera Initiative. The recent recipient of the OPERA America IDEA Grant, she is currently working on a new opera called *Chhlong Tonle*. She teaches English at Queens College (CUNY).



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